

Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Eighth Edition



Chapter 13

Field Research and
Focus Group Research

Learning Objectives

13.1 Describe the process of doing a field research study.

13.2 Differentiate between survey interviews and field research interviews.

13.3 Explain how reliability and validity of data is determined in field research.

13.4 Describe the ethical issues associated with field research.

13.5 Describe the characteristics of focus group research technique.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (1 of 13)

Objective: Describe the process of doing a field research study.

- Most field research studies focus on a particular location or setting.
- People being studied in a field setting are called **members**.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (2 of 13)

- A Short History of Field Research
 - Academic field research began in the late 19th century with anthropology.
 - Chicago School
 - World War II
 - Ethnography
 - Thick description** is a rich, highly detailed description of specifics rather than a summary or generalization.
 - Ethnomethodology

13.1 Understanding Field Research (3 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research
 1. Prepare to enter the field.
 2. Choose a field site and gain access.
 3. Apply strategies.
 4. Maintain relations in the field.
 5. Gather and record data.
 6. Exit the field.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (4 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research

1. Prepare to Enter the Field.

- Be Flexible.
- Organize Yourself.
- Defocus.
- Be Self-Aware.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (5 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research
 2. Choose a Field Site and Gain Access.

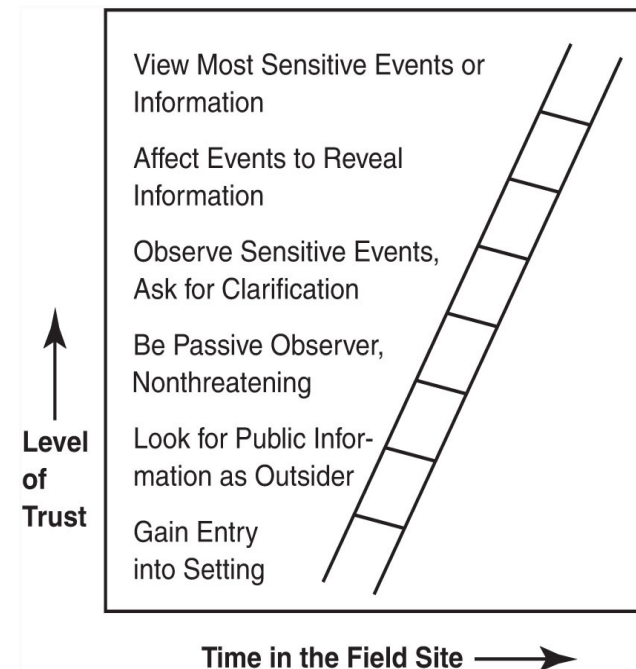
Select a Site.

Deal with Gatekeepers.

Enter and Gain Access.

Assume a Social Role.

Figure 13.1 The Access Ladder



13.1 Understanding Field Research (6 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research
 2. Choose a field site and gain access. (continued)

Adopt a Level of Involvement.

Build Rapport.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (7 of 13)

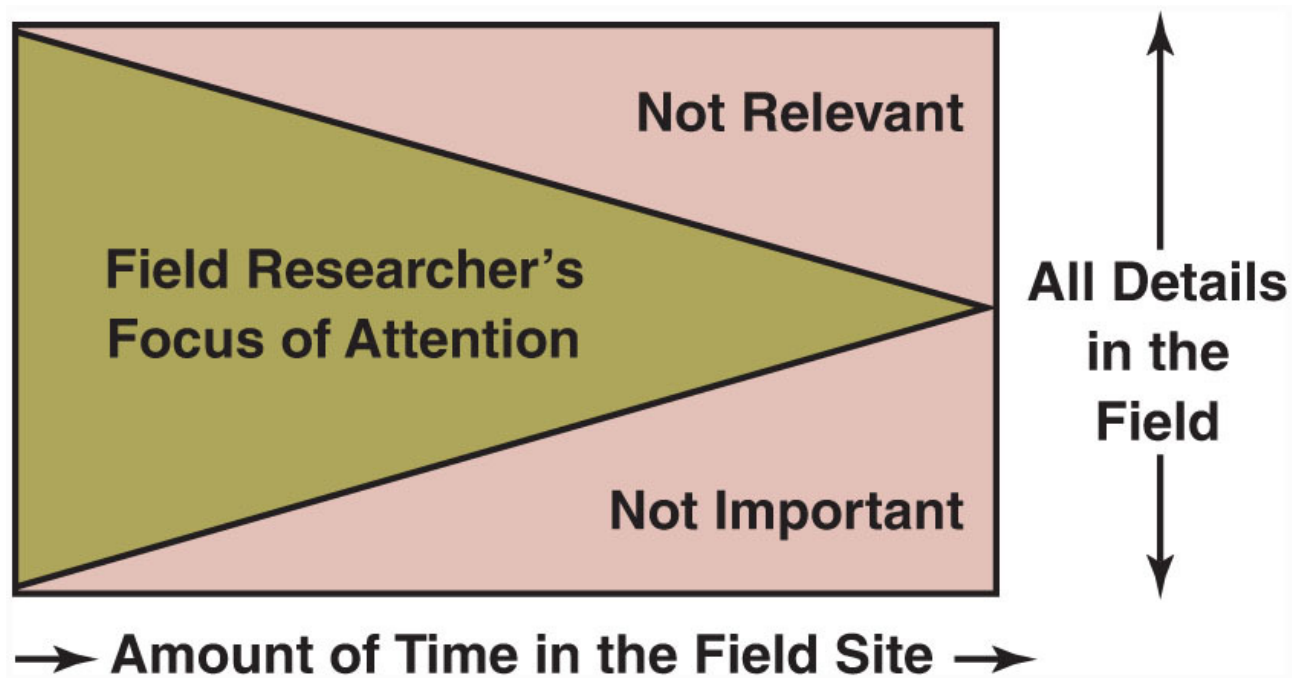
- Steps in Performing Field Research

3. Apply Strategies.

- Negotiate.
- Normalize Research.
- Decide on Disclosure.
- Focus and Sample.
- Assume the Attitude of Strangeness.
- Notice Social Breakdowns.
- Cope with Stress.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (8 of 13)

Figure 13.2 Focusing in Field Research



13.1 Understanding Field Research (9 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research

4. Maintaining Relations in the Field

- Adjust and Adapt.
- Use Charm and Nurture Trust.
- Perform Small Favors.
- Avoid Conflicts.
- Appear Interested.
- Be the Acceptable Incompetent.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (10 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research

5. Gather and Record Data.

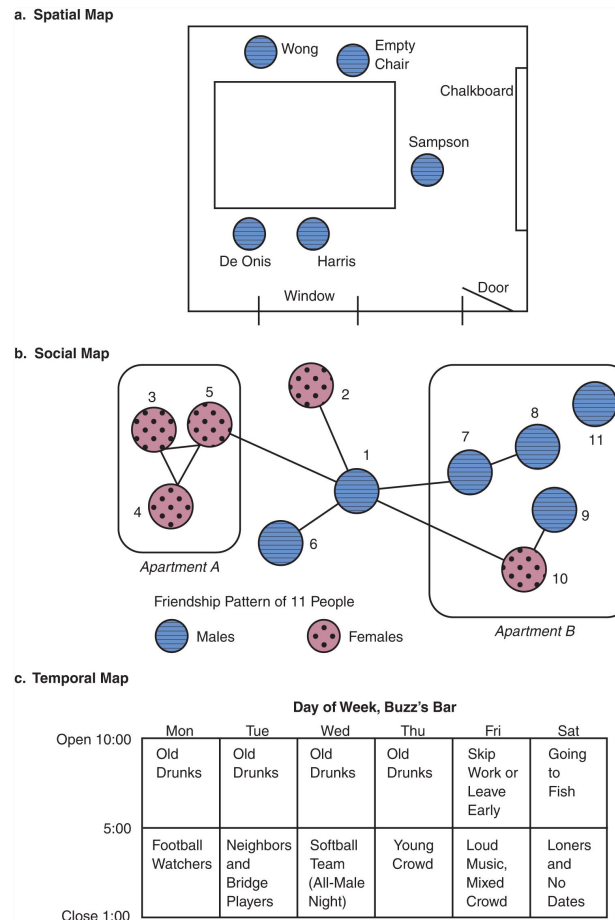
- Absorb and Experience.
- Watch and Listen.
- Record the Data.

13.1 Understanding Field Research (11 of 13)

- Types of Field Notes
 - Jotted notes
 - Direct observation notes
 - Inference notes
 - Analytic memos
 - Maps, diagrams, and artifacts
 - Machine-recorded data

13.1 Understanding Field Research (12 of 13)

Figure 13.4 Types of Maps Used in Field Research



13.1 Understanding Field Research (13 of 13)

- Steps in Performing Field Research

6. Exit the Field Site.

- The exit process depends on the specific field setting.
- Let members know a short period ahead of time.
- Sometimes a ritual or ceremony helps signal the break for members.
- Feminist researchers advocate maintaining friendships with members after exiting.

13.2 The Field Research Interview (1 of 4)

Objective: Differentiate between survey interviews and field research interviews.

- The field interview involves asking questions, listening, expressing interest, and recording what was said.
- Field interviews involve the mutual sharing of experiences.
- Do not force answers or ask leading questions.
- Retain the members' jokes and narrative stories in their natural form.

13.2 The Field Research Interview (2 of 4)

- Field interviews occur in a series or over time.
- Avoid probing inner feelings until intimacy is established, and proceed with caution even then.
- The field interview differs from a friendly conversation in that it has an explicit purpose.
- Field research interviewers watch for markers—passing references made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state.

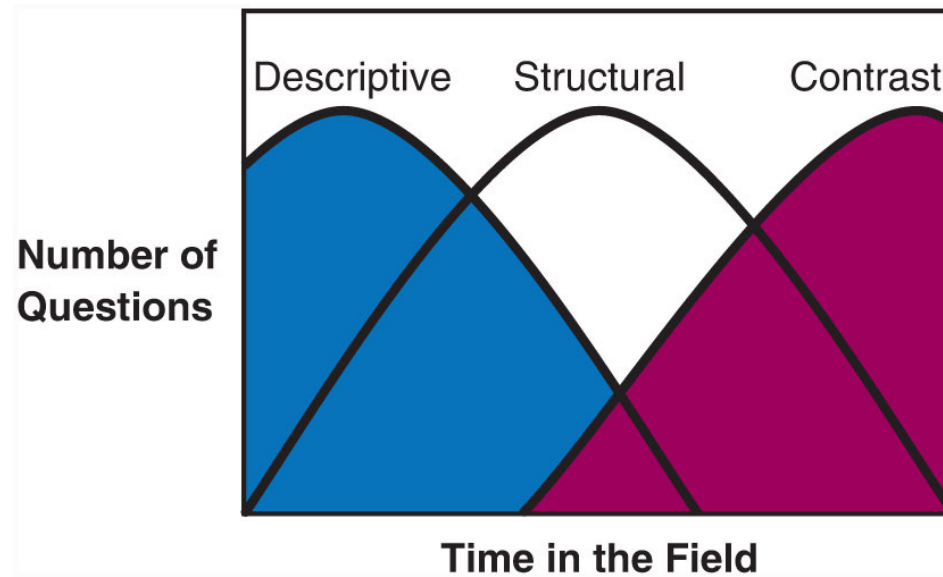
13.2 The Field Research Interview (3 of 4)

- Life History
 - A **life history interview** (also called life story or biographical interview) overlaps with oral history.
 - The researcher asks open-ended questions to capture how the person understands his or her own past.
 - Exact accuracy is less critical than the story itself.
 - Researchers sometimes use a **life story grid** when asking what happened at various dates.

13.2 The Field Research Interview (4 of 4)

- Types of Questions Asked in Field Interviews

Figure 13.5 Types of Questions in Field Research



13.3 Data Quality (1 of 3)

Objective: Explain how reliability and validity of data is determined in field research.

- The Meaning of Quality
 - For the researcher following a positivist, quantitative approach, high-quality data are reliable and valid. They give precise, consistent measures of the same objective truth for all researchers.
 - For a field researcher following an interpretive approach, quality would mean that the researcher accurately captured the respondent's experiences.

13.3 Data Quality (2 of 3)

- Reliability in Field Research
 - **Internal consistency** refers to data that are plausible, given all that is known about a person or event and eliminating common forms of human deception.
 - **External consistency** refers to data that have been verified and cross-checked, with other, divergent sources of data.
 - Reliability in field research also includes what is not said and done but is expected or anticipated.

13.3 Data Quality (3 of 3)

- Validity in Field Research
 - Ecological validity
 - Natural history
 - Member validation
 - Competent insider performance

13.4 Ethical Dilemmas of Field Research

Objective: Describe the ethical issues associated with field research.

1. Covert research
2. Confidentiality
3. Involvement with illegal behavior
4. The powerful

13.5 Focus Group Research (1 of 2)

Objective: Describe the characteristics of focus group research techniques.

- A **focus group** is a qualitative research technique in which people are informally interviewed in a group discussion setting.
- A facilitator is used to facilitate free, open discussion.
- Groups should be homogenous but should not include close friends or relatives.
- The most effective groups are presented with clear instructions.

13.5 Focus Group Research (2 of 2)

Chart 13.7 Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups

Advantages

- The natural setting allows people to express opinions/ideas freely.
- Open expression among members of social groups who are marginalized is encouraged.
- People tend to feel empowered, especially in action oriented research projects.
- Survey researchers have a window into how people naturally talk about survey topics.
- The interpretation of quantitative survey results is facilitated.
- Participants may query one another and explain their answers to one another.

Limitations

- A “polarization effect” exists (attitudes become more extreme after group discussion).
- Only one or a few topics can be discussed in one focus group session.
- A moderator may unknowingly limit open, free expression by all group members.
- Focus groups can produce fewer ideas than individual interviews.
- Focus group studies rarely report the full details of study design/procedure.
- Researchers cannot reconcile the differences that arise between individual-only and focus group—context responses.

Conclusion

- Field researchers begin with data analysis and theorizing during the data collection phase.
- It is necessary to reflect on alternative ways to think about an analysis.
- Doing field research has a greater impact on the researcher's emotions, personal life, and sense of self than doing other types of research.
- In addition to a strong sense of self, a researcher needs an ability to listen and absorb details, as well as patience, sensitivity, and empathy.

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